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ABSTRACT

As a result of declining enrollments and the associated need for budget reductions, many school districts are confronting the issue of school closure. This guidebook presents an alternative to closing schools, namely, the option of transforming them into community centers and addresses the issues involved in cooperative planning with the community for such a move. The first section discusses the challenges presented by school closure and provides guidelines for conducting a needs assessment and a study to determine other possible uses for the facility. The next section discusses the specific issues that arise in developing a community center: determining how to use the building, redefining the school district's role, operating a community center, community involvement, allocation of space, and expenses and revenue. The final section addresses legal and practical issues that arise in any decision of a school district to lease its space: finding tenants, negotiating leases, and creating a climate. The final section discusses long-term factors that will affect the success and evolution of the community center. (TE)

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TARGET TOPIC SERIES

REOPENING THE DOORS

A Guidebook For Planning

The Future Of Closed Schools

ELIZABETH A. BOTHEREAU

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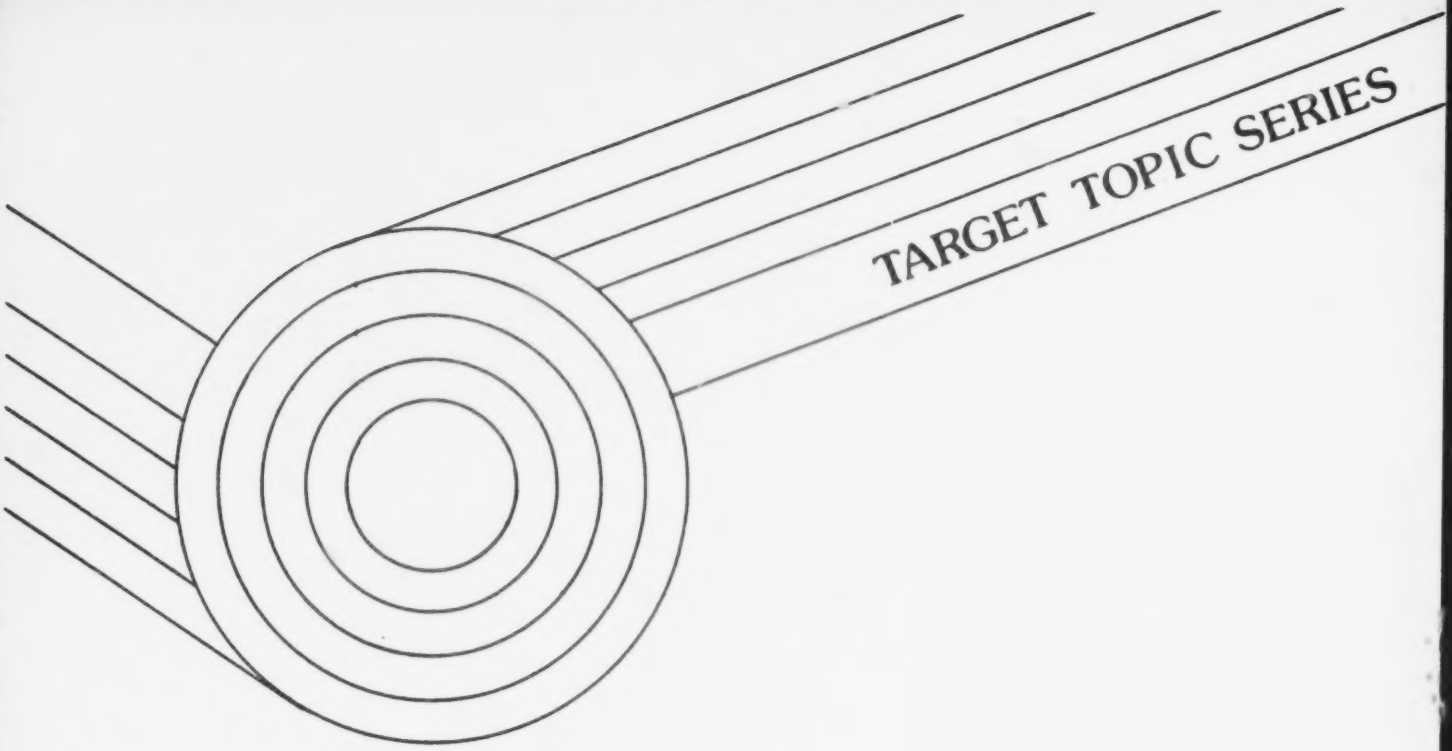

THE TARGET TOPIC SERIES

The Target Topic Series is a set of guidebooks developed for community educators and Community Education advisory council members. The guidebooks discuss many topics related to effective Community Education operation: Council Skills, Community Assessment, Planning, Public Relations, Finance, Programming, Legal Questions, Staff Development, Community Involvement, Coordination and Cooperation, and Evaluation.

The Target Topic Series is designed to highlight the skills or the issues that relate to each subject; and presents an overview which should be of value to the reader.

The Series was developed in response to an identified need for materials to aid and enrich the Community Education process in the state of Minnesota, particularly for areas that do not have ready access to inservice opportunities. The materials are applicable to Community Education programs throughout the country and are available for national distribution.

The Target Topic Service is written by staff members of the Community Education Center at the College of St. Thomas and by Community Education professionals in Minnesota. The series is distributed by the Community Education Center at the College of St. Thomas.

FOREWORD

Communities dream of having an opportunity to be creative. However, with scarce resources and with school districts plagued with declining enrollment, creativity seems to be forgotten, while the challenge of turning a negative into a positive stares us directly in the face. School closure presents a unique opportunity to listen to the community--to hear its expression of interest in creating a community center from a closed school. One only has to visit several community centers which were developed in this way to come away believing that anything is possible. A former library can become a community gallery, kindergarten rooms can become craft rooms for senior citizens, classrooms can be transformed into child care centers or offices, and "the school" can still be the center of community life.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction. 1

Pre-test 2

An Answer For The Future 4

School Closure: The Challenge 5

- Community Planning For School Closure 7
- Needs Assessment 8
- Facility Utilization Study 9
- Putting It Together. 14
- Alternative Uses 14

Development of a Community Center 17

- Determining How To Use The Building 17
- The School District's Role Defined. 18
- Operating A Community Center 19
- Community Involvement 20
- Allocation of Space 22
- Expenses and Revenue. 24

Leasing Space 26

- Finding Tenants. 27
- Negotiating Leases 28
- Creating a Climate 30

A Successful Community Center 31

Post-test 32

Suggested readings. 34

WHAT DO YOU KNOW?

1. How should we plan for future use of school buildings during the school closure decision making process?

2. What information should be gathered to aid our decision of which school to close?

3. What factors should be considered in deciding whether or not a closed school should be retained for community use?

4. What groundwork should be laid prior to school closure which will assist the successful transition from school to community center?

5. What are the community's needs and interests regarding a community center?

6. What groups should we involve in the preliminary planning?

7. How are priorities for use of the community center determined? Who needs to be involved in these decisions?

8. What are the policies, issues, and legal questions that should be addressed?

9. How do we define the role of the school district? The city?

10. What is the district's philosophy regarding building use?

11. How does the school district's role in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for the community affect the success of a community center?

12. What do we have to know about codes and zoning?

13. How do we decide whether to sell, lease, or retain sole use?

14. What capital expenditures might be involved? What remodeling, refurbishing should we do? Who pays for it?

INTRODUCTION

This guidebook is for the community, the advisory council, the community educator, administrator, or school board member who seeks an alternative to closing the school, locking the door, and walking away.

The material presented identifies the issues and questions which will arise if another option--a community center--is developed. While the issues and decision points may be similar for most communities, the needs assessment results, priorities, plan, and statement of goals will be unique to your community. And the ultimate concept of a community center, including its use and process of its development, will be a very individualized experience, based on community involvement, planning, cooperation, and support.

15. What are the problems with "mothballing" the building until we need it again?

16. How should we staff a community center?

17. How do we determine and allocate expenses of running the center?

18. How do we go about leasing space?

19. What other issues about operation do we need to consider?

20. Should we have an ongoing advisory council for the Center?

21. How are tenants involved in center operation?

22. What is our operating philosophy of a community center?

AN ANSWER FOR THE FUTURE

Declining enrollment and the associated need for budget reductions is never a pleasant future to contemplate. As more and more school districts are faced with the reality of a reduction in student numbers, the issue of school closure becomes increasingly familiar.

Some districts have attempted to accept the inevitable and view it as an opportunity to reassess community-wide needs and resources. Rather than recoiling from the problem, they have instead chosen to accept the challenge of shaping a new future. Attempting to examine and choose the best options which would suit the changing needs not only of their school district, but also of the communities they serve becomes their goal.

As school districts choose to engage in a broader, more comprehensive planning process, even though brought on by the prospect of fewer resources, a new direction may emerge for the district and the communities it serves. Declining enrollment and school closure, therefore, may become the vehicle for engaging in a critical assessment of needs and a valuable process of making choices regarding the school district's and community's future. One of these choices may be to reopen closed schools for community use.

SCHOOL CLOSURE: THE CHALLENGE

School districts, by necessity, have become more involved with forecasting and planning. Particularly during periods of rapid growth or decline in the enrollment, planning is essential to maintain a balance between program requirements, financial resources, and facility needs. As enrollments continue to decline, increased pressure is placed on school district budgets, and pressure to balance resources and programmatic concerns within the district becomes intense.

Typically, school districts have viewed declining enrollment as a disaster characterized by reduced financial resources leading to low staff morale, loss of staff, and programs, and often school closure.

While communities are often able to recognize that enrollment figures and financial resources may not justify keeping all of the schools in the district open, they are often unprepared to deal with the loss of "their" school. Typically, a battle ensues. While much of the concern centers around the loss of programs and loss of a local educational facility, it is also apparent that school closure, in many cases, represents a threat to people's sense of control. It also increases their fear of the unknown--what will happen to that facility? Apartments? Houses? A business? Something that will be an eyesore--which may happen if the building is to be closed and maintained at a minimum level (mothballed). Many are concerned with what the neighborhood will look like. What about vandalism? All good questions and all unknowns which raise the level of apprehension and create a frantic climate in which to try to make rational decisions.

Dealing constructively with school closure, therefore, has become a nationwide challenge. Since the early seventies, declining enrollment has forced the closing of elementary, junior high, and high

schools which were the pride and focal point of neighborhoods and communities. For many school districts the obvious solution was to sell or mothball their unused real estate. These tragic monuments to an earlier day when the neighborhood school served as a focal point and a center of activity now often serve only as angry reminders that once more the schools don't serve the community's needs.

For some school districts the solution has been less simple and generally more rewarding. Rather than accepting that the building will be boarded up and mothballed for possible future use (ugly) or sold to get the white elephant off the district's hands (expedient), districts may choose to accept the challenge of retaining some or all of the closed schools for the community's use. Choosing to respond to community concerns by offering a desirable alternative use can reduce the force of the blow and turn the energy which has been focused on closure into more positive and constructive planning for a new future for "our school".

Supported by strong citizen pressure and buoyed by the anticipation of bridging the often widening gap between school district and community, many school districts have elected to make surplus facilities available for use as community centers.

As the movement toward development of community centers has increased, districts have been able to analyze the experiences of neighboring communities. Each community's experience is different, but the developmental steps are similar. As with any new endeavor, the key to success is planning. In the development of a community center, the planning must occur in partnership with the community. And the center's success very likely will depend on the community's involvement.

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Community Planning for School Closure

Planning for the use of closed schools needs to begin as early as possible. At the time that projections regarding declining enrollment indicate that school closure is probable, school districts need to begin laying the groundwork for the decisions that must be made. Planning for the building's future use during the decision-making process regarding which school to close enables the district to work constructively with the community in reaching what hopefully will be an acceptable solution to a difficult problem.

The growth of Community Education and the expansion of the school district's educational mission to serve community residents from birth to death may add a new dimension to the planning process as districts examine their facility needs for the future. Electing to serve the entire community often leads to different options--different decisions regarding the future use of facilities, particularly possible during periods of declining enrollments. Thus, a new balance may be examined in forecasting facility needs: balancing community interests and potential use of newly available space with the reduced demand on the space due to declining enrollment.

A community-wide or neighborhood planning process can turn the impending disaster into an enriching opportunity for community involvement--if the school board and administration are willing to make such a commitment.

As plans for use of closed schools are included in the decision-making process, a number of factors should be examined in determining which facility to close and what to do with those that must be closed. Ideally, a long-range planning committee will be formed, including representatives of the various interests: K-12 staff, parent-teacher associations (PTA's), Community Education, community members representing the broad spectrum of community interests, and district administration.

The responsibility of the committee will be to examine all of the various factors which may affect and which may be affected by the school closure decision.

The committee must understand the needs of the school district as well as those of the community. To obtain this knowledge, the committee must have enough time to examine available information such as enrollment projections, and to seek additional data which will assist in the decision making process.

Two sources of information in particular may serve as a focus for the group as it begins the planning process: a thorough, community-wide needs assessment conducted prior to specific decisions regarding school closure and a facility utilization study.

Needs Assessment

A number of questions may be asked within a needs assessment questionnaire which will provide useful information regarding community needs and interests. Members of the K-12 and Community Education staff and PTA and advisory council members should be consulted in the preparation of questions so that the various ideas and issues may be correctly presented. Social service agencies in the area should also be consulted regarding community needs which the survey might address. Directly or indirectly, the municipality(ies) served by the district may have an interest in the outcome of the needs assessment. They also may wish to submit questions or may be able to provide assistance in the design or sampling technique selected.

While the needs assessment may be used to identify a variety of school district and community needs, answers to particular questions may provide useful information regarding potential uses of school facilities which may be vacated due to declining enrollment. The community's strong statement of need for particular services or programs may later develop into an endorsement of a particular course of action which aids the school board in deciding how to use closed schools.

Subjects of such needs assessment might include:

- -need for a senior citizens center
- -identification of problems that may exist in the community (drug/alcohol abuse, lack of child care, need for cultural programs, etc.)
- -identification of interest / age groups wishing increased programming and services through Community Education, recreation and other organizations

-availability of recreational/social offerings for retarded persons

-need for crisis intervention service, emergency transportation, food, clothing, etc.

-accessibility to social/health services

-desire to enroll in college/technical classes, if available in the community

-need for basic skills classes for adults

-desire to enroll in adult enrichment classes

-support for turning closed schools into community centers

Facility Utilization Study*

A facility utilization study is designed to examine current use of all facilities in the school district and to project future levels of use based on present trends and potential future development. Basically, there are seven steps which should be included in studying facility utilization.

1. Determine enrollment patterns. Study and research:

   *sources of new students and reasons for losses

   *building trends--single/multiple family dwellings, one versus two or three bedroom apartments or condominiums, etc.

   *influx of immigrants (projections)

   *current class size compared to projected size

   *other sources of enrollees, especially use of space by private or parochial schools

2. Determine basic program assumptions

   *K-12 class sizes (projected and optimal)

   *special classes or use of rooms for particular purposes, i.e., vocal, music, tutoring

*Adapted from St. Louis Park School District, St. Louis Park, MN., Facility Utilization Study, 1979

3. Develop up-to-date data on each facility in the district, including an evaluation of the adequacy of the facility (educational, building, site, community factors)

Many factors may be identified which contribute to a profile of the district's facilities. The items presented in the following list should serve as examples of information to be obtained during the planning process.

*Aesthetic

*Access

a. handicapped

b. elderly

c. public transportation

d. life safety-2nd grade and younger children

*Parking

*Location

*Flexibility of space

*Environmental quality

a. building

b. neighborhood

*Shared use potential

*Playgrounds and grounds

*Needed improvements

*Energy utilization

*Square footage

a. building

b. rooms

*Layout/floor plan

*Joint powers relationships/cooperative use

*Recreational space available

*Communications system (internal and external)

*Code compliance, life safety, and environmental

*Specialized areas

*Special features

*Storage

*Unused/unusable space

*Ease of maintenance

*District transportation

*Estimated use potential without major expenditures (number of years)

*Adequacy measures:

a. educational

b. building

c. site

4. Develop a profile of current usage of each facility in the district, including day, evening, weekend, summer and school year use.

Many of the district's buildings may already serve multiple purposes through day and evening use of the facility. Facility use data should provide a profile of the amount of time various areas or buildings are used and the amount of space in use within each building. Multiple uses can be identified for specific areas, including an analysis of the various purposes served. Again, the following list provides only an example of items to consider.

*Floor plan showing use of all spaces (including dual use, if applicable; e.g., Community Education)

*Instructional use

a. regular classrooms

b. specialized classrooms (e.g., science labs)

c. pre-kindergarten, etc.

d. specialized education rooms

e. gifted

f. other (e.g., tutorial, resource rooms, etc.)

*Support use (e.g., offices, kitchen, storage, custodial, etc.)

*Community use

a. Community Education sponsored

b. building sponsored (K-12 program)

c. leases

d. permits (community groups)

*Recreational use

a. district

b. Community Education

c. Parks and recreation

d. other (e.g., parochial)

*Day, evening, weekend use

*Day care, preschool, or Latch Key

*Office spaces

a. district

b. community

*Co-curricular use

*Joint Independent School District programs

*College and Vocational-Technical use

5. Project future use requirements, including potential development of new programs and services.

Current use and future projections require careful consideration in the Facility Utilization study. The items listed are examples of factors which may influence the planning process.

*Enrollment

*Class size standards

*Room capacity

*Class size adjustments (new sections created)

*Number of requirements/electives (secondary students)

*Adult enrollment

*Shared-time usage

*Cooperative programs with other districts

*Scope of community services program (and potential expansion)

6. Identify the costs related to each facility and make projections of future costs of maintenance, utilities and capital expenditures.

The cost of operation involves many factors. Options such as mothballing, leasing, or retaining

buildings for community use require additional information for comparison of costs and benefits in the decision-making process.

*Financial forecast

*Capital fund status

*Joint funding possibilities

*Rentals

*Capital improvements by tenants

*Legislation

*Operating costs

*Marketability - zoning

*Vandalism costs

*Mothballing costs

*Maintenance and repair costs

7. Establish the school district's philosophy regarding its role in the community's overall development; identify its present role and examine its potential for future involvement.

   *Consider cooperative planning, programming, and program funding with municipalities, other units of government and organizations, including development of joint powers agreements

   *Examine commitment to citizen involvement in the planning process

   *Examine present statements of purpose and goals and consider revisions to include role in community's development

   *Examine school district's role in facilitating development of new services and programs which benefit the entire community

Putting It Together

As all of the information from the needs assessment and facilities utilization study is compiled, the long-range planning committee may wish to develop a visual presentation of its findings to share the information it has compiled with the community. Enrollment tables and comparative charts with profiles of each facility are particularly useful means for communicating the information to the public. A series of meetings with the PTA's, advisory councils, and general public may be necessary to discuss the information. Again, the goal is to give the community and the school board as much good information as possible so that there can be general understanding of the problem, alternatives, and, eventually, the final solution.

Alternative Uses

The challenge for a school district and for communities faced with the dilemma of what to do with closed schools is to view the problem creatively. Ignoring the obvious or easy solutions, one must, instead, place a priority on finding the most effective and efficient use of the facilities which will benefit the entire community. This does not rule out the option of disposing of one or more facilities--instead, it places that decision in a framework which considers the overall, long-range facilities needs of the school district and community.

The long-range planning committee can integrate the various needs expressed by the school district and community through the combined use of its facilities utilization study and needs assessment. While initially its role will be primarily to collect and present information obtained from the multitude of sources, eventually the committee may be required to prepare a statement of needs and to research new options for program or service delivery and space utilization.

Based on the needs assessment, for instance, need for child care programs, access to county or regional social services, interest in development of a cultural or arts center, or need for more adult enrichment or basic skills programs may be identified. The school district, in its analysis of needs, may project the need for additional space for offices, special projects, or

resource centers which could be located away from operating schools, possibly in the "closed" buildings. Community recreational needs may also be considered--particularly if loss of a facility will have an adverse impact on community use of gyms, pools, or fields.

Potential alternative uses for newly available space, therefore, need to be carefully identified and then articulated to the community for their review and comment.

In some communities the priority for use may be to serve neighborhood interests and needs (for education, recreation, human services, etc.). In other districts a closed school may be used to serve a specific district-wide purpose such as a community recreation center or housing a multitude of adult basic education and training programs. Or the facility may be developed as an extension of the district's mission to provide lifelong learning opportunities for the community, serving a variety of ages and interests through the availability of educational and enrichment programs.

As priorities are established, shared use and combined purposes may be explored to achieve maximum efficient use of facilities particularly available through the development of a community center.

For example:

1. District-wide consultant and resource offices are located in one-third of the space in a closed elementary school;

   Day care and other human services fill another third;

   Community Education uses the remaining space for adult enrichment classes, a center for the arts, parenting programs, and a cooperative preschool.

2. Senior citizens use one-third of the former elementary school building for a Senior Citizens Center which is partially supported by the local municipality;

   Congregate dining, health services, legal aid, and senior citizens use some of the offices and the cafeteria;

   Community Education's gymnastics program uses the gymnasium, and preschool child care is located in two classrooms;

Non-profit and public human services and educational organizations are tenants in the building, leasing the second floor, covering most of the cost of the building operation.

3. Community Education moves its offices and some of its classes to a closed elementary school.

   A municipality within the district moves its recreation department office and some of its activities into the facility.

   A portion of the space is leased; the balance of the operating cost and maintenance of the building and grounds is divided between the school district and the municipality.

4. A school district loses one of its junior highs to declining enrollment, yet needs to retain access to the pool, fields, gyms, and a storage facility located within the building.

   A district-wide Latch Key program is located in the building, along with several district program offices.

   Over half of the building is leased to the area vocational center and non-profit organizations to cover most of the operating cost of the facility.

   The school district uses the athletic facilities for after school practices and games.

   The city recreation program continues to use the gyms every evening.

In developing any such plan for facility utilization and recommending it to the school board for approval, there must be good community commitment to such alternative use--a reflection of the community's goals and interest.

The result of an effective plan may be little cost to the school district and a major return to the community for their investment; public lands, which may soon be at a premium, are being retained for the public's use. Cooperative planning with local municipalities and other educational and social service providers may lead to cooperative use of facilities serving broad community interests and insuring continued return on the community's investment.

DEVELOPMENT OF A COMMUNITY CENTER

Once it has been determined that a school which is to be closed will be redeveloped as a community center, a number of issues will surface which demand consideration. As the needs are examined and a concept of potential use is developed, the first question which may arise is whether to retain ownership.

Determining How To Use The Building

As plans for alternative use of facilities are developed, options still exist regarding ownership and leasing of space. If the facility will be jointly or primarily used by another municipality or organization, ownership becomes a major question. Facilities are sometimes sold for a nominal or token amount (often $1.00) to such a party. In so doing, however, the school district is choosing to give up control over the use of the facility and responsibility for maintenance of the property--both of which may or may not be viewed as responsible decisions by the community. In addition, should the other party later choose to sell the facility, the school district will have been deprived of that source of income as well.

Another important factor regarding ownership, of course, is the possibility of population increase and a larger school-age enrollment in future years. In addition, as the role of education changes--perhaps extending the classroom population to include more pre-kindergarten and adult learners--schools may develop a broader focus. New demands may be placed on use of school facilities, and formerly closed schools may need to be reopened to respond to changing community needs. The cost of retention should be weighed carefully against the potential future cost of land acquisition and new construction.

Assuming that the school district has decided to retain ownership of the facility and wishes to oversee its development as a community center, a number of issues arise which deserve careful consideration.

The School District's Role Defined

The school district's role is very important to the center's development. Having chosen to continue an active role in the building's operation, the school district will probably need to consider options and develop policies within each of the following areas.

1. Philosophy regarding building use--will the building be available for community use for meetings, use of gymnasiums, auditoriums, etc.?

   Procedures for use and policies regarding fees for special services or categories of use may need to be developed.

2. Length of commitment--is the center being established as a long-term addition to the community, or is the decision to retain or sell the facility merely being postponed a year or to some date further in the future?

   Programs, tenants, and community groups will make different plans and feel more or less committed to participate in the center's development, depending upon the district's goals for the center.

3. Role in relationship to municipalities--will the center be jointly developed or renovated with city involvement?

   Shared planning and joint program sponsorship often allow for efficient use of staff and financial resources. In addition, city access to redevelopment funds may assist in renovation of the facility for senior citizens, handicapped access, etc. As part of the planning process, therefore, cooperative arrangements such as Joint Powers Agreements may be developed with municipalities defining each party's scope of responsibility in such areas as maintenance, operation, financial contribution and renovation.

4. Maintenance and operating procedures--policies and procedures need to be established which allow for a smooth transition to operation as a community center.

Identification of necessary repairs and major remodeling needs (particularly for handicapped access and code compliance) should be completed at the onset.

A decision should be made, if space is to be rented, whether remodeling will be done by the district or whether space will be rented "as is".

A schedule should be developed and the bulk of the work completed, if possible, prior to tenants and programs moving in.

Custodians' schedules, building hours, and maintenance schedules will also need to be determined, based on the schedules of the particular activities which will be located in the building.

Questions will arise about access to the facility during school holidays and on weekends. Policies may be needed so that prospective tenants, community groups, and district staff can plan accordingly.

Operating A Community Center

Not only does the school district need to plan carefully for the maintenance (financial resources and manpower) of a community center, but it must also determine building and program supervision needs based on the extent of programming anticipated for the facility. Individuals may need to be assigned to schedule community and school district use of the facility, process permits for use, show space to prospective tenants, negotiate leases if rental income is desired, and supervise or program activities sponsored by the district.

In many districts much of this responsibility may be assumed by Community Education as an extension of the building use and programming responsibilities already underway in operating schools. Lease negotiation, policy development, and overall scheduling of the facilities may be added as centralized functions within the department. Staffing, however, may take on new dimensions as the opportunity develops for daytime programming and a full schedule of day and evening activities. Building supervision as well as creative

program development will require the hiring of trained staff with good organization and communications skills.

A typical staffing pattern for an elementary school-turned-community center might be:

One full time Community Education Coordinator responsible for programming, scheduling, building supervision and management, working with the advisory council, and community and tenant relations.

One clerical assistant

Two custodians on eight-hour shifts, plus some additional custodian time if operating on weekends.

Close cooperation is needed, particularly between the community center staff, Community Education director, and supervisor of buildings and grounds during the transition period. As schedules are established, space is allocated, and tenants move in, new demands may be placed on building and district staff, and new flexibility may be required--which can be accomplished best through cooperative planning and good communication.

Community Involvement

While we have discussed operation of a community center primarily within the context of internal communication and activity, relationships with the community are of equal, if not greater, importance.

Ideally, the center will have been developed in response to the community's interest. Residents may have organized and lobbied the school board to ensure that their school would be retained for community use. And while the decision will be a victory for those who worked so hard for its retention and planned for its future use, others in the immediate neighborhood may still have concerns which need to be addressed.

Adequate off-street parking, for instance, may need to be developed to maintain a cooperative relationship with the neighbors. Some of the neighbors will still be feeling very sensitive about the loss of their school, viewing the community center as an intruder. If the

building has been vacant for some time, chances are there will also be some resentment about its appearance and possibly an increase in vandalism.

Neighbors care about the way the building looks, and they're interested in plans for its future. It is important, therefore, to keep them informed. They may wish to serve on an advisory council for the center, they may wish to participate in activities or apply for a job that's right across the street, or they may ask that short-term parking be posted for their side of the street. Regardless, their involvement and their knowledge that there is someone who is concerned about their feelings can make the difference.

Similarly, the community as a whole often sits back waiting to be asked to get involved. There is usually an active core of people who willingly take part in the planning and development of a new project. The entire community needs to be kept up to date. They need to be informed of developments, and special interests need to be sought out to participate.

Groups of senior citizens may need to be brought together to discuss plans for use of space. Artists may be called together to discuss potential use of space for classes and studios and, possibly a community gallery. Translating needs and priorities into reality is not something staff can do alone. While it is more difficult and certainly more time consuming to make plans involving many diverse interests and needs, the community's sense of ownership is guaranteed only through meaningful involvement in the development process. Sharing in the decisions regarding allocation of space, choice of colors for rooms, and actually doing some of the work leads to a commitment which is critical to success. Furnishing rooms in the new community center, fund raising for new equipment, and sponsorship of a community open house, special events, and classes can all become the responsibility of community members and an advisory council who share in the center's development.

An advisory council is almost essential to the community center's evolution. Initially, it serves as a bridge in the transition process. It may

include members from the PTA and other groups involved with the school before it closed who have a vested interest due to the loss of their school. The council may also involve other community members, including representatives of more diverse interests, i.e., senior citizens, single adults, and local service providers.

The role of the council, as plans for the center develop, is to use all of the information at its disposal--from the needs assessment, from the neighborhood, from particular groups or organizations in the community--to assist the staff and ultimately the school board in establishing specific goals and a program which will serve the community needs.

As the center evolves, the advisory council serves as a primary communication link between the center and the community, providing input for program revision or expansion and sharing information with others to increase interest and awareness of what the community center can offer.

Allocation of Space

As the center's role is defined and goals are developed, allocation of space becomes the next major issue. Priorities for use should be established which provide guidance in the allocation and assignment of space.

If programs serving young children or the handicapped are being considered, areas which comply with applicable codes will probably be the starting point in determining potential use of space. Ground level space and proximity to lavatories and exits will be primary considerations. School district and specific community center program needs should also be determined early in the planning so that space can be identified for classrooms, offices, storage, etc. Preliminary determinations should be made, if space is to be rented to outside groups, regarding the most rentable space. Other space may be reserved for future internal programming needs or for scheduled use by community groups.. Many communities also choose to reserve space for local human service and community-oriented programs which may be occupied at little or no cost to the tenant. Since meeting space and recreational space seem always to be in high demand, plans should be made for scheduling auditoriums,

the cafeteria, gymnasiums, little theaters, and other "common spaces". Different types of groups may be assigned priority status in the scheduling of space.

As an example, one community schedules the use of common space, using the following order of priority:

1. School district (including Community Education)
2. Tenants
3. City recreation
4. Non-profit organizations from the immediate community
5. Non-profit organizations from other communities
6. Profit-making organizations for educational purposes

The major difficulty in assigning space is trying to balance the various needs and desires of the district (K-12 and Community Education) community groups and organizations, the municipality(ies), and, if applicable, the tenants. Many factors may be considered in making decisions. Some of the most common are listed below:

-ground level, close to exits, meeting code requirements (handicapped and child care programs)

-availability of an elevator and proximity if one is available

-proximity to loading dock

-visibility

-windows and ventilation in areas to be used as offices

-ramping of entrances for handicapped access

-availability of adjoining rooms

-availability of small office areas

-air conditioned space or adaptability

-ability to block noise from other activities, i.e., proximity to gym, playground, etc.

-ability to divide space or area of building for singular uses, i.e., for senior citizens

-availability of water, 220 electrical in rooms

-ability to remodel, refurbish

Expenses And Revenue

Even if a building were mothballed, there would still be considerable costs associated with its retention. Insurance, grounds maintenance, electricity, building checks, minimum heating, and the costs of vandalism are only some of the expenses which must be underwritten by the district. It quickly becomes evident that much of the operating cost is still required even if no one is using the facility.

It is wise, therefore, when closing a building, to have a plan for use immediately available. Vandalism increases with an empty building and may quickly diminish as new programs replace those which left. A full, active building is often the best deterrent to vandalism--and one quickly notices that, in fact, community centers fare far better than the building probably did under its former use.

There are certain costs, for staff and utilities for instance, which will increase with capacity use of the facility. However, much or all of the operating costs can be returned through rental of a portion of the facility. Again, planning is the key. With the school board's endorsement, a plan for rental of space may be developed. The school district should anticipate covering most of the expense during the interim (one to two years) after closing while tenants are sought and lease negotiations are underway.

Several different operating arrangements have developed in school districts which have pursued the development of community centers. In some cases, Community Education takes over the building and operates it totally, using as much space as it needs, renting out the rest, and retaining the revenue.

In other communities, the school district continues to maintain the building, and all revenue is deposited back into the General Fund to offset expenses. Usually, Community Education again uses a portion of the space and it responsible for supervising programs and scheduling space for the building.

In other instances, a third party, such as a management company, may be responsible for allocating space

and supervision, and the school district and Community Education request or are allocated space in the facility along with other prospective tenants.

Another fairly typical format is a shared use whereby a school district and municipality through a Joint Powers Agreement may share a portion of the building, renting out the balance. Revenue is used to offset expenses, and the city and school district share maintenance and any additional costs not recouped through the rental space.

Leasing a portion of the space, therefore, is often a very favorable solution to offset the cost of building operation, allowing the community the benefit of access to the tenant organizations as well s the other educational/recreational activities and programs available in a community center.

LEASING SPACE

New issues arise and policies must be established once a school district decides to lease space. The first issue relates to the tax status (as defined by the Internal Revenue Service) of prospective tenants.

Typically, the easiest route for a school district is to choose to retain its non-profit status for the total building by establishing the policy of renting only to public or private non-profit organizations. Tax status in this case becomes the determining factor. If zoning allows for residential, educational programs, or offices, occupancy permits may be the only requirement. If the zoning is strictly residential (which includes educational), then special use permits may have to be obtained if tenant purposes stray far from educational use of the facility.

If the building is located in an area zoned for business/commercial activity, the question will arise whether to lease space to commercial (profit-making) enterprises. Two elements need to be considered: the philosophy of the school board regarding whether such a decision is in the best interest of the community (the taxpayers) as a whole, and the willingness of the school district to file separate tax returns for the newly established taxable portion of the facility. If the building is in an area zoned residential and the district wishes to lease space to commercial enterprises, availability of a zoning change or possibly a special use permit would need to be explored with the city staff and planning commission.

The school district's choice of adding commercial use or retaining non-profit status may also be determined by:

1. access within the community and from major transportation arteries;

2. desirability of the space to be leased (often determined by age of the facility, location, and general appearance); and

3. the district's commitment to a philosophy of community access to a broad range of educational and social services which may be attracted to lease the space if that philosophy is presented, thereby making them more available to the community.

The school district's philosophy regarding "public space" may also be central to the decision. A fundamental tenet in some communities is that "buildings and property purchased with public funds should be retained as long as possible for the public's use". This tenet may be used in establishing a policy of renting only to public or private non-profit organizations, especially seeking out those who would directly benefit the district's educational program and the community in general.

Finding Tenants

Identification of prospective tenants basically means getting the word out. Non-profit groups, in particular, are always looking for reasonably priced rental space. They are often interested in the possibility of co-location with other organizations which provide similar human service functions.

How do you get the information to the right people?

Use a variety of methods:

*News articles

*TV coverage

*Cable TV announcements

*Notices in other organization and professional association newsletters. Identify the service organization networks and use their grapevine.

*PTA's and advisory councils should be kept informed. They're often an excellent source of referrals.

*Chamber of Commerce staff should be informed.

*Contact other educational providers and area human services directly.

*City, school district, and county elected officials and staff should be kept informed. They're often the first point of contact.

Develop and distribute brochures identifying the rental space available, common space available for community and tenant use, location, contact person, and, if available, the district's philosophy regarding leasing space.

As publicity is sent out about availability of space, information should be distributed within the district regarding who to contact for information about rental space. Everyone from switchboard operators to custodial staff to advisory council members should be informed so that referrals are made smoothly. One person should be designated as being ultimately responsible for working with prospective tenants and possibly negotiating the leases.

Typically, contacts follow a pattern:

1. requesting information about the site and rental rate

2. an initial request to tour the facility, followed by two to five return trips, bringing others from the organization for tours

3. requesting space to meet in the building to discuss the potential site following a tour

4. requesting additional information: floor plans, lists of already established tenants, list of common spaces available to tenants and a base lease

Negotiating Leases

Successful leasing is often determined by the ability of the school district representative to assess the prospective tenant's space needs and assist them in matching their needs with various options within the building.

The individual serving as the lease negotiator should be familiar with school district procedures and policies as well. Knowledge of zoning, fire and life safety codes, building and custodian hours, union negotiated agreements, policies and procedures followed by buildings and grounds crew, potential district requirements for building use in the future, and scheduling of community use of the facility is needed in discussing building occupancy and leasing with prospective tenants. Honesty and openness regarding possible problems or restrictions and a willingness to seek alternative solutions or to identify areas where the district (as well as the tenant) can be flexible are the keys to a successful leasing relationship.

The most important element in negotiating a lease is to begin with a base lease that fully specifies the tenant's and lessor's obligations. This typical base lease, usually developed by the district's legal counsel, may include the following items:

1. Description of leased premises
2. Purpose for which premises will be used
3. Term of lease (usually 1-5 years)
4. Amount and procedures for rent payment
5. Leasehold improvements (including any stipulations regarding approval or completion)
6. Building rules and regulations (including what shall be furnished by lessor)
7. Lessor and tenant scope of liability
8. Insurance requirements
9. Partial destruction of premises - terms for repair
10. Breach of covenants
11. Renewal or extension of lease
12. Signatures by both parties

Most leases, if developed in a standard format, will require little modification. The school district's legal counsel will probably wish to review proposed modifications as negotiations proceed until a pattern is established and acceptable modifications are identified.

After the lease is signed, custodians and other district staff will want to be notified so that the space can be made ready for occupancy. Typically, plans for remodeling or refurbishing which are permanent modifications to be completed by other parties will require approval by the lessor. Again, a system should be established for obtaining approval.

Creating A Climate

For tenants, one of the unique aspects of renting space in the community center, as opposed to general office space, is the "tone" of the building. Community centers tend to have an informal atmosphere, and there is a sense of being part of a cooperative venture. People want to know what's going on in the building. Tenants may wish to meet together periodically to discuss interests, sharing of resources, or potential problems. In some centers tenants are represented on a center's advisory council. Generally, they want to be involved, they want to know what's going on and to feel like they're part of a community.

As part of the community center's smooth operation, therefore, building directories, lists of tenants (including names of staff), shared use of a lounge area, and the opportunity to have input are all important elements which help fulfill the concept of a community center. The overall climate which staff, tenants, community groups, and advisory council members all help to create is greatly affected by the manner in which information is communicated and the manner in which problems are resolved.

A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY CENTER

As tenants move in and community use of the facility increases, two primary factors may affect the continued success and evolution of the community center.

Much of the success of the center may be attributed to the district's ability to anticipate and respond to new problems resulting from tenant and community use of the facility. Everyone, from school board members to custodians, will, at some point, be confronted with new requests and concerns. The district's flexibility will be tested.

Yet, as problems are resolved, new policies and procedures will emerge. If well-conceived and consistently applied, they will serve as tools for the center's smooth functioning in the future.

A long-term commitment to the center's development is the other really critical element. Buildings which exist year-to-year with no assurance of a future are able to raise little hope in the community and often receive less attention regarding programming, staffing, general upkeep, and maintenance. When long term commitments are made (often signified by board policy or by the signing of multiple year leases), community members are more apt to invest greater time, energy, and resources in the development of "their" community center. The difference can be dramatic. Again, the district and the community as a whole have the opportunity to benefit from the creative efforts which result from such involvement by interested neighborhood and community residents.

As classrooms are transformed into ballet studios and woodworking shops, human services offices, and cooperative preschools; as new color appears on the formerly sedate school walls; as activities are scheduled for residents of all ages from early morning until late at night; one realizes what it means to a community to be given the power to create.

The only obstacles are those we put there ourselves!

WHAT DO YOU KNOW NOW?

1. How should we plan for future use of school buildings during the school closure decision making process?

2. What information should be gathered to aid our decision of which school to close?

3. What factors should be considered in deciding whether or not a closed school should be retained for community use?

4. What groundwork should be laid prior to school closure which will assist the successful transition from school to community center?

5. What are the community's needs and interests regarding a community center?

6. What groups should be involved in the preliminary planning?

7. How are priorities for use of the community center determined? Who needs to be involved in these decisions?

8. What are the policies, issues, and legal questions that should be addressed?

9. How do we define the role of the school district? The city?

10. What is the district's philosophy regarding building use?

11. How does the school district's role in promoting lifelong learning opportunities for the community affect the success of a community center?

12. What do we have to know about codes and zoning?

13. How do we decide whether to sell, lease, or retain sole use?

14. What capital expenditures might be involved? What remodeling, refurbishing should we do? Who pays for it?

15. What are the problems with "mothballing" the building until we need it again?

16. How should we staff a community center?

17. How do we determine and allocate expenses of running the center?

18. How do we go about leasing space?

19. What other issues about operation do we need to consider.

20. Should we have an ongoing advisory council for the center?

21. How are tenants involved in center operation?

22. What is our operating philosophy of a community center?

SUGGESTED READINGS

Community School Centers Series, New York, New York: Educational Facilities Laboratories, 1978.

"A Concerned Citizen's Guide to Community School Centers", Number 1.

"Planning Community School Centers", Number 2.

"Managing Community School Centers", Number 3.

"Facility Issues in Community School Centers", Number 4.

"Using Surplus School Space for Community School Centers", Number 5.

"A Resource Book on Community School Centers", Number 6.

Surplus School Space--The Problem and the Possibilities, Columbus, Ohio: Council of Educational Facilities Planners, International, 1978.

END

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